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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000405

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SUBJECT: TONGA BREAKTHROUGH: TRIPARTITE COMMITTEE AGREES ON
PLAN FOR SIGNIFICANT DEMOCRATIC REFORM; ISSUES REMAIN

REF: SUVA 349 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

1. (C) A tripartite parliamentary committee tasked to forge a compromise deal between government and pro-democracy supporters on the political future of Tonga delivered a surprisingly strong democratic proposal on Aug. 3. The plan proposes 17 popularly elected People's Representatives, 9 elected nobles, and up to 4 representatives appointed by the King, giving People's Reps a numerical majority in Parliament for the first time in Tonga's history. The plan further proposes that elected parliamentarians select the Prime Minister from among their own ranks, with the PM then choosing cabinet members, again from within the elected parliament, though the King could add his 4 non-elected representatives. If adopted by Parliament and agreed to by the King and Privy Council, the proposal would represent a watershed triumph for Tonga's democratic forces. The King could retain significant influence, though reportedly the current monarch is inclined to leave day-to-day governing to the PM and Parliament. The tripartite committee couldn't agree on several important issues. Two in particular, the date of the first election under the arrangement and constituencies and electoral mechanisms for the expanded corps of People's Representatives, could yet stall the process. PM Sevele wants the next election, due in January 2008, to be postponed to 2010 or 2011. The pro-democracy camp still wants the 2008 election on time. As yet unsubstantiated reports claim the King favors an early poll, which, if true, could tip the scale in favor of democracy sooner rather than later. Still, the nuts and bolts details of new People's Reps seats will trigger political-survival instincts and could take a good while to negotiate. End summary.

Details of the Proposal

2 (U) According to a summary posted on the Prime Minister's website, as well as information from contacts within the pro-democracy movement, the tripartite committee made the following proposals:

-- the size and composition of the Parliament will change from a maximum of 34 members (of which nine are elected by Tonga's 33 nobles from their number, nine are elected by universal suffrage by Tonga's non-noble citizens, and up to 16 Cabinet members are appointed by the king on the advice of

the Prime Minister) to a maximum of 30 (consisting of 17 elected "People's Representatives," nine nobles, and up to four members selected by the King);

-- the Prime Minister, currently appointed by the King, will instead be chosen by the 26 elected MPs from among their own ranks;

-- the Ministers of the Cabinet, who are currently chosen by the King (relying on advice from various quarters, including from the Prime Minister) and drawn with only a few historical exceptions from outside the Parliament, will now to be formally proposed by the Prime Minister for the King's approval, and drawn from the MPs;

-- the term of the Parliament will be extended from the current three years to not less than four years and not more than five;

-- the current People's Rep electoral system, with just five, island-based electoral districts, will be changed to an electoral-constituency system with an expanded number of districts; and

-- further research, consultations and deliberations, including with outside experts, will be pursued to determine the final details of the changes to the electoral system.

and the Devil in the Details

13. (C) The final two points have immediately raised concerns within the pro-democracy movement which suspects the

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Government has proposed changing electoral procedures in an attempt to delay an early election under the new system. Under current arrangements, the distribution of People's Reps by islands bears little relationship to relative populations.

Voters on the main island of Tongatapu, where about 70 percent of the population lives, elect only three of the nine People's Representatives, whereas the sparsely populated outer island groups elect the remaining six. A candidate can run for a seat from any one island, regardless of residency. Each person on an island casts votes for all available seats.

Thus, a voter on Tongatapu currently casts three votes. According to our contacts, the Government favors more electoral constituencies, with something like equal numbers of voters in each, and a residency requirement for candidates, though details are still unknown.

14. (C) A contact close to the pro-democracy movement claims the Government proposals to change the current system had not previously been raised and "are not apparently based upon the recommendations of any independent assessment of the current system." That system has worked well, he said, and, in the view of the People's Reps, will continue to do so. He said the traditional "over-representation" of the smaller, outer island constituencies is a politically sensitive issue that would augur against a purely numbers-driven approach to creating new electoral districts.

15. (C) On timing of the next election, PM Sevele had made clear his strong preference for postponing the next election until 2010 or even 2011, wanting to allow a lengthy cooling off period from last November's riot. Under the Constitution, though, the election must take place by early 2008. The People's Reps have said publicly they want the 2008 elections to go ahead as scheduled, using the new 17-9-4 formula and other aspects of the Committee's proposal. Privately they have told us they may be willing to negotiate the date, but 2010 is simply too much of a delay. Rumors have begun circulating that the Government's effort to delay the election is a ploy to ensure the current leadership can control the implementation of a recently agreed Chinese loan to rebuild the capital, damaged in the riot. Pro-democracy

contacts believe PM Sevele and others realize they are unlikely to be reelected (under either the current or the reform system) and they want time to secure benefits before departing.

His Majesty a Closet Democrat?

¶6. (C) A key pro-democracy contact has reported to us that, in the wake of the tripartite committee's announcement, the King expressed pleasure at the compromise and a preference to maintain the 2008 election date, with the new provisions in place. The source reports the King firmly rebuffed a Sevele proposal to insist that the monarch retain the prerogative to name the Prime Minister. The contact said that the People's Reps have informed the King that, if elections go forward in 2008 under the new scheme, he will have "the full support of the people."

¶7. (C) The King has reportedly shown himself ready to turn over another new political leaf as well. In an e-mail shared with us, the New Zealand attorney defending several of the People's Reps in sedition and "riotous assembly" cases arising from the November riot claims he has received a tentatively positive response from the King for the idea of a "national amnesty" regarding the riot. According to the attorney's sources, the King reportedly only sought details about how an amnesty might affect pending insurance settlements, which insurers reportedly have stalled hoping convictions on sedition charges would permit triggering escape clauses.

Comment

¶8. (C) In light of the stony silence that had prevailed between the Government and People's Reps in the months following the riot, the swiftness and liberal nature of the Committee's recommendations come as a welcome surprise to all, except perhaps PM Sevele, who has repeatedly attempted to slow the pace. Sevele has articulated a concern that Tongan conservatives remain influential and might rebel if pushed too fast. Certainly, though, another factor in the

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PM's thinking could be political survival for as long as possible. The unresolved electoral details will be thorny. Those details will determine various individuals' political futures, including the futures of each current People's Rep and the PM. Still, we sense that at least the People's Reps realize the current opportunity to transform Tonga politics must be seized. While we cannot be certain of the King's views, our contacts in the pro-democracy camp believe he has signaled he is ready to let this historic power shift take place. An open question is whether the very conservative Crown Prince, the King's younger brother, is on board; but democratic reform is likely to be very difficult to contain once well under way. And the prospects for such reform in Tonga have never looked brighter, even with the remaining devilish details to be resolved.

DINGER